Document Title: How to Do Things with Raymond Chandler: Reading and Writing (about) The Big Sleep

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English 147.5
Mystery Stories

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How to Do Things with Raymond Chandler: Reading and Writing (about) *The Big Sleep*

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My English 147.5 students completed the attached assignment sequence through almost the entire month of October. By the time we reached Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep* (1939), the students had already produced two fairly standard short essays, as well as a response paper on Sherlock Holmes' criminals and several journal entries on the London-based classic detective stories with which we began the course. As they were beginning this sequence, my students were also working their ways through their first revisions, through a process which stretched from September 24 through October 8.

I had spent the first three weeks' class meetings getting to know my students and their writing--and letting them get comfortable with the business of talking and writing to each other. Most of our early class discussions had focused on plot and character concerns, rather than on our authors' distinctive writing styles or narrative techniques. During the fourth week of class, as we read G. K. Chesterton's "Defence of Detective Stories" (1902) and Raymond Chandler's "The Simple Art of Murder" (1944), I introduced my students to the concept of close-reading and reading for style, looking not only at what the texts say but how they say it. On September 22, I tried an in-class style-reading activity which involved groupwork and the overhead projector. I divided my class into four groups and gave each group an overhead transparency of the same paragraph from Chesterton's "Defence." Each group was to find every example of a particular stylistic feature (verb varieties, word choice, figurative language, and sentence structure); at the end of class, each

group presented its findings to the rest of the class, laying its transparency over the transparencies which other groups had already presented, so that we ended up with a dramatically colorful, annotated version of Chesterton's paragraph.

Many of my students were, understandably, recalcitrant about this relatively new business of "butchering" Chesterton's and Chandler's texts, or of "putting things in those paragraphs that aren't there," as they put it. One of my students went so far as to ask me whether I had a teacher's manual that told me I "could" read one of Chesterton's stories in the way I had presented it to the class. Because I wanted my students to continue to look as closely at the language of their texts as we had looked at Chesterton's "Defence" on September 22, I defended the practice of close-reading and included a "paragraph analysis," as the students came to call it, as the mandatory last question of their initial reading response questions for the beginning of Chandler's novel *The Big Sleep*. When many of my students produced highly successful "readings" of specific sections of the book, I followed this first close-reading up with a second the next week. But because I wanted my students to *enjoy* looking closely at language and to see the potential benefits of this sort of analysis--and because I knew that prelims were already getting underway --I knew I had to devise something more interesting for these seventeen dutiful students.

I hadn't originally planned to screen Howard Hawks' 1946 film version of *The Big Sleep* in class; the movie has always struck me as inexplicably enigmatic and mannered, with very little of the sheer fun and wickedness, or of the ultimate bleakness, of Chandler's novel. However, it was in deciding to screen Hawks' film that I found the answer to my writing assignment needs. If Hawks could reimagine Chandler's novel so dramatically, why couldn't my students? From my experiences with creative pre-writings in the summer Anthropology of Food and Cuisine class I

taught with Jane Fajans, I had a hunch that, if they could write about the novel in a variety of different ways, my students would find it easier and more meaningful--ultimately, more *natural*--to create richly detailed supports for their arguments, when it came time to write the formal essay at the end of the sequence.

I thus began the official Essay #3 sequence, building from the two earlier close-reading exercises, on the Thursday before October Break. The other advantage of this sequence for me, I might add, was that it was enormously fun to create, requiring me to reimagine the audience for my own assignment-writing, my students themselves.

Essay Assignment #3a, "The Big Pitch," was designed as a take-off on (actually, just shy of a rip-off of) the beginning of Chandler's novel, which features our apparently down-and-out hard-boiled hero Philip Marlowe's description of his arrival at his newest wealthy client's mansion. To increase the humor value of the assignment, I made reference to the single most hated story we had read to date, Grant Allen's "The Adventure of the Cantankerous Old Lady." "Why would anyone make *that* story into a film?" one of my students scoffed as I distributed the assignment sheet. "Well," I replied, "read the sheet. Apparently, you did it. Why *did* you?" In the last few minutes of class, before my students headed off for break, I tried to communicate to them that I wanted them to have fun with this assignment, to use it as a way to think about what they thought the novel was all about, while practicing some of the close-reading skills we had developed over the past two weeks' writings and discussions. They had also spent the last half of class, on this particular Thursday, doing groupwork and large-group discussions about what the novel's main concerns and themes were.

What I most wanted my students to gain from Essay #3b were the beginnings of the kind of knowledge of a text one can only develop from really interacting with it. I wanted each of them to have to consider Chandler's novel from a writer's "creative" point of view, rather than from the student's "critical" point of view--so that, as the sequence went on, I could narrow that (almost entirely artificial) gap between "creation" and "critique."

I was most struck, when my students returned from break, by their almost-frightened responses to the assignment itself. At the beginning of class on October 15, I asked, "How did you like this essay?" A cacophony of protest was their response: "It was so vague, I didn't know what you wanted." "I thought you wanted us to be creative, but I wasn't sure whether I had to write in an essay form, or what you wanted." "I didn't know what you wanted." "It was too difficult to tell what you wanted." Until this moment, I had not realized just how concerned my students were about "what I wanted." For this realization alone, I was glad that we had undertaken this creative part of the sequence--for the rest of the semester, I explicitly built into my assignments the "What do you want?" question, along with my answer.

I worried, as they handed in their essays, that they would prove to have written weak or uncertain responses. The class discussion on October 15 suggested to me that the assignment had been beneficial, though; many students had much stronger opinions about particular scenes and characters than they had had before break, and several students were offering very detailed readings of scenes, leading me to believe that those scenes had probably figured largely in their "Big Pitches" (as, indeed, many of them had). The students' responses to #3a were, for the most part, delightful: extremely well-written, with ample detail, very lively voices, strong ideas, and even

some very enlightening takes on the novel as a whole. Almost every student had a different "vision" for a new film version of the book.

On October 15, after I collected Essay #3a and we discussed the end of the novel, I handed out Essay Assignment #3b, which masquerades as a letter from the (suddenly better-defined) production company to which the "Big Pitch" was originally to have been submitted. This format for the assignment sheet for #3b was a last-minute inspiration; next semester, I will probably present #3a in the form of an actual advertisement, taken out by Strange Productions, that the screenwriter has clipped from *Variety*, so that my students have a better idea of their audience for that first piece of writing. Because of the outcry against #3a, I devoted more class time on October 15 to explaining the motivation behind this assignment sequence, as well as my expectations of them as increasingly independent thinkers and writers.

Again, to increase the humor value of the assignment, I built in a few in-jokes: "Strange" was the last name of one of the female detectives we had studied in Week Two; "Helen" was Helen Stoner, of Conan Doyle's "Adventure of the Speckled Band"; "Baker" is, of course, "Baker Street," home of Sherlock Holmes; "Lynch Court" was the location of another detective's office; each of the recipients of the in-house "Memorandum" was either a detective or a criminal in one of our earlier stories. The premise for this assignment sheet was that the students' "pitches" had all been accepted, and the production company wanted to see a script sample. The students were only "supposed" to have received the vague letter from Helen Strange, wherein she explained the technical requirements of #3b. But inadvertently, the company's office manager had let the in-house memo slip into the photocopier, which meant that the students all had a leg up on what the

company actually wanted. Thus, I was able to present some more specific guidance for the assignment, while breaking the information up into more readable and engaging sections.

When my students turned in their three copies on Tuesday, October 20, I put the two anonymous sets on reserve in Uris Library and had them read each other's renditions of the surprisingly large range of scenes they had scripted--and scripted well, I might add. At my suggestion, many of my students also consulted screenplay websites so as to gain a better sense of what a "real" screenplay looks like; I made amply clear to them that they didn't need to produce "real" screenplays, just scripts that met the expectations of the in-house memo.

Meanwhile, on October 20, we began watching Hawks' *The Big Sleep*. By this point, the students had written two separate pieces which put them on the creator's side of the camera; thus, they came to class feeling as though they had already been in Hawks' position. Many of their journal entries reflected great eagerness to see how another filmmaker had transformed Chandler's novel.

As auxiliary material, I also distributed photocopies of the Motion Picture Production Code which governed the motion picture industry at the time *The Big Sleep* was scripted and filmed. I had spent part of the previous weekend researching the impact the Production Code had upon Hawks' film and had presented a sketch of the Production Code's history to the class, via e-mail, so that they would have a greater arsenal of background information for their comprehension of--and writing about--the movie and the book. I had also located (at long last) the William Faulkner and Leigh Brackett screenplay of *The Big Sleep* and had put it on reserve in Uris.

Finally, on October 20, I also handed out the assignment sheet for Essay #3c, which would be the more standard critical treatment of Chandler's novel and at least one of the story's other "versions." Essay #3c was designed not only to force my students to apply their by- now-detailed understanding of this text to the writing of critical prose, but also to give them models for essay questions themselves, since I already knew that Essay Assignment #4 would involve my students' designing their own topics.

Because of the specific responses I received to Essay Assignment #3c, I know that I want to make some changes to the sequence for next semester. While my students did indeed produced more sound and richly detailed comparative readings than they had produced for my class to that date, far too many of their essays were marked by a certain vagueness in central argument--a vagueness which, I'm fairly sure, stemmed from their suddenly having so much to say and communicate and not enough ways to communicate it in an organized fashion. I have thus appended here the thesis handout which I used during the Essay #4-5 sequence; next semester, I will probably use a handout something like this one, if not this one itself, in conjunction with a class discussion on tying well-developed individual paragraphs together with a well-developed unifying argument.

In all, though, I was pleased with this sequence because of the greater critical engagement with texts and films which my students demonstrated throughout the rest of the course. When we viewed *L.A. Confidential* the week after Essay #3c was due, many of my students took notes and subsequently produced detailed critical readings of specific scenes and lines, and I would like to think that Essay Assignments #3a-c had something to do with this critical understanding and appreciation. Ultimately, I think these three assignments, following up on the preceding two short close-reading exercises, were what marked a turning point for many of my students; many students

have since told me, in evaluations and portfolio introductions, that the creativity and freedom encouraged by Essays #3a and #3b not only helped them write #3c but also forced--and then enabled--them to think more critically about what they were reading and seeing from that point in the semester onward.

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(Originally distributed to my class via e-mail on Thursday, September 24)

Reading response questions for Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep* chs. 1-8
(Due Tuesday, September 29)

In two to three typed, double-spaced pages, answer three of the following.
Note: You must answer the last question.

1. On Thursday I remarked off-handedly that the penultimate paragraph of Chandler's "The Simple Art of Murder" seemed like a "masculine" paragraph; when I thought about it later in the day, I realized that I wasn't actually sure what a "masculine" paragraph would look or sound like. Perhaps a more appropriate term would be "androcentric": focused on man (and, I would argue, on a *certain kind* of masculinity, by no means the *only* possible kind). As far as you can tell from the first eight chapters of *The Big Sleep*, does Philip Marlowe embody the same kind of masculinity as the unnamed detective-hero of Chandler's essay? A simpler way to ask this question: what kind of masculinity does Chandler present to us in the character of Philip Marlowe?

2. On the flip side, what sort of femininity (or femininities?) does he construct through Carmen, Vivian? We spoke about women as passive victims--what other sorts of roles do you see here? How is our understanding of these female characters influenced by Marlowe's narration? You may also wish to consider the woman at the "regular" bookshop and the woman at Geiger's shop.

3. How does Marlowe read social class? Where does he place himself in society?

4. What, for Marlowe, seems to be the significance of Geiger's "real" business?

5. Given what you know after this weekend's reading, what would you guess to be the significance of the bedrooms at Geiger's house?

6. (REQUIRED) Choose one short passage (1-2 paragraphs) that you think contributes significantly to our understanding of Philip Marlowe as a character AND/OR narrator. Compose a "reading" of this passage, referring (if necessary) to other passages from these first eight chapters but focusing mainly on your selected passage. Your reading should highlight the important parts of the passage, indicating (for instance) crucial words, phrases, and stylistic elements (sentence length, diction level, figurative language--the usual suspects). You should attempt to glean from these elements of the passage both what it's saying in a straightforward way and what it might be implying. You should also give some analysis of *how* the passage is saying or implying these things. Go as far as you can toward exhausting the passage in your explanation of its significance. Your reading should be about a page long.

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(Originally distributed to my class via e-mail on Friday, October 2)

One further note on your (at least) one-page readings due Tuesday: This time, you do not have to pick your passage because it's important to your understanding of Philip Marlowe, detective and narrator. ANY telling passage will do--just be sure that, in the course of your "reading," you indicate *why* and *how* it's telling. In other words, if you pick a passage because it's crucial to a certain aspect of the book that you find intriguing, be sure to make that certain aspect clear at some point in your analysis.

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Essay Assignment #3a: The Big Pitch

It is about ten o'clock in the morning, mid October, with a sullen sound of rain in the background and a sharp scent of vacation in the air. You're everything the up-and-coming screenwriter ought to be. Except for one problem. You tried to adapt "Adventure of the Cantankerous Old Lady" to the silver screen last year. It died like a dry car in the desert, leaving you high and dry. "Too many voice-overs," the studio told you. "Not enough suspense. No one seems interested." No projects in sight. Until the four million dollar call, that is.

A new but promising Hollywood studio has decided to produce a new film version of *The Big Sleep* and has issued a call for script ideas. You read over the call as you peruse *Variety* over breakfast, and you know that the right pitch could bring you a lifetime of lucky days. You also know that you've spent a lot of quality time with Raymond Chandler's novel lately, doing diligent close-readings of crucial scenes. Lucky coincidence. You've tried to get into Philip Marlowe's head and into Chandler's writing. Now this film studio wants to give new life to this hard-boiled writer and his most famous creation. You feel sure that you're their screenwriter.

In order to convince *them* that you're their screenwriter, however, you'll have to engage their interest in you and your work by pitching your vision coherently and persuasively. From the *Variety* advertisement, you gather the following information:

- This studio wants to create a two-hour film of *The Big Sleep*, which means that some parts of the novel may have to go. In broad terms, the studio wants to know which parts of the plot you believe need to be foregrounded--and which parts absolutely have to be cut--in order to make the strongest possible film.

  You figure that you should probably think about the relative importance of the novel's different plotlines and character relationships. And in order to assess those relative importances, you'll probably want to figure out how you'll present the overarching point of Chandler's novel, as well as its major themes or issues. Of course this means that you'll need to figure out what you think the novel's main point or central plotline / relationship / quest ***is*** . . .

- The studio wants you to provide **three** examples of scenes that would be crucial to your rendition of Chandler's novel. The studio execs want to hear what specific aspects of those scenes strike you as being especially important for your vision of the film--and how those specific aspects might be captured visually.

  You guess that "specific aspects" might include crucial lines, scene details, or character details--and those are just your first thoughts (you might come up with other valuable "specifics" after you leave the breakfast table and start

working . . .). You're suddenly glad that you've had some experience with careful explication of Chandler's book, and with using specific evidence to argue points persuasively.

- The studio wants to be sure that the flavor of Chandler's novel comes across in the film, but the execs are flexible regarding the means of communicating that flavor--leaving you, the prospective screenwriter, some room to stretch creatively.

  This creative stretch-room appeals to you because you've spent a long time studying this novel and have your own "vision" of how to convey visually Chandler's distinctive language and characterization--not to mention the overall tone of his book. But you remember well your experiences with "Cantankerous Old Lady" . . . . "Too many voice-overs," that studio said. So you know that you don't want to over-use the voice-over in order to capture Marlowe's narration. You wonder, "How am I supposed to portray Chandler's similes?" and feel sure that other such questions will come up as you work.

- The studio wants some idea of the sorts of actors and actresses you envision delivering your lines, though of course a prospective cast shouldn't be a major focus of your pitch.

- Your pitch is supposed to be about three or four double-spaced pages long (you've heard that studio execs absolutely stop reading when they get to page five) and must be in the hands of the studio executives by 8:40 a.m., October 15.

M E M O R A N D U M

DATE: October 15, 1998

TO: O. Marvell, M. Dyer, M. Valentin, I. Norton

FROM: H. M. Strange

RE: *Big Sleep* Script Selection Process

The letters are out--I've picked seventeen of the most promising proposals and have requested script samples (one representative scene) on my desk by 10 a.m. October 20. So that we're all working on the same standards, here are some of the things the company's looking for, in no particular order:

- **Meaningful dialogue and stage directions**. The writers get some elbow-room here, but the dialogue shouldn't wander aimlessly or stagnate in fine points--unless there's a reason for philosophizing. Any possible monologues should be carefully staged. And the script should detail actors' and actresses' actions and reactions, as well. **Remember that characterization is key!**
- **Detailed explanation of camera shots**. The best script candidates will tell you what and how the camera will see. *Possible* questions they should answer for you (though **obviously** every script won't address every one of these questions ll the time--that would be ludicrous!): What's in the frame of the shot? When do shots change? How distant from or close to its subject is the camera--in other words, are shots long or close-up? When does this distance change? When does the camera move? When does it stay still? Do the shots flow smoothly or will they be jumpy or quick? The scriptwriter should address the issue of point of view when necessary (e.g., should the scene switch to Marlowe's point of view, the scriptwriter should note as much).
- **Detailed explanation of setting**. The best script candidates will state and describe their scenes' settings. Is a scene an interior or an exterior one? What's the lighting? What's the weather, since we all know how important weather is to Chandler...
- **A sense of tone and mood**. Somehow the script samples should convey to you a sense of the scene's atmosphere. Be alert, because these writers are talented and may not bring you tone on a silver platter. Look for subtle cues in **dialogue**, **stage directions**, **mentions of music**, **camerawork**, and so on.

I'll send the script samples along to you by noon Tuesday and will expect your reactions by 8:40 a.m. Thursday.

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Essay Assignment #3c: The Big Wrap-Up

NOTE: You should not feel that you must address every possible topic for consideration listed in the following questions. Choose a question and then consider the proposed sub-topics which seem most helpful and provocative for your own focused and detailed exploration of Chandler's novel and at least one of its subsequent "versions" or "translations." You are encouraged to incorporate any other considerations that crop up in your work and seem pertinent to your chosen question. As you gather evidence and write, be sure to employ the writing process and close-reading skills we've developed so far this semester.

1. How does sexuality function narratively and thematically in Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep* and Howard Hawks' 1946 movie version? As an alternative, you may wish to discuss Chandler's novel in light of the Faulkner/Brackett screenplay (on reserve in Uris). Be sure to be clear about what sorts of sexuality we see, where we see them, and why they're present (or absent, as the case may be). Possible considerations: the relationship of sexuality to emotion, to vulnerability, to danger, and/or to social stability in each work. You may wish to consult the Production Code in the process of discussing the movie. You may also find it helpful to focus your essay on two or three specific scenes or characters which (or whom) you read closely as they appear in each work.

2. In October 1949, Chandler wrote in a letter to another writer, "I'm all for your demand that pictures, even tough pictures, and especially tough pictures, have a moral content. (Because *The Big Sleep* had none I feel a little annoyed with you for not realizing that the book had a high moral content.)." Assess the validity of Chandler's various claims here, with regards to both his novel and the 1946 film. Possible questions to consider: Does one version of *The Big Sleep* in fact have more moral content than another? Or do they simply present *different types* of moral content? In what aspects of the novel and the film do you find evidence of a "moral" or of "morality"--or of their *absence*? You may wish to consider the content and influence of the Production Code when addressing this question.

3. Compare your scripted scene (essay #3b) and the 1946 film version's corresponding scene, reading the scenes against each other *and* the original scene in Chandler's novel. Alternately, substitute the Faulkner/Brackett screenplay version of the scene for the 1946 version **OR** for your scene (though you should make this second substitution ONLY if the scene differs in the screenplay and in the film version--many *do* differ). How does this scene's function (in narration, theme, characterization, etc.) change with each translation? What social, cultural, political, and/or artistic/creative constraints do you find at work in various translations of Chandler's novel--as well as in Chandler's novel itself? If your particular scene does not appear in either the Faulkner/Brackett or the 1946 version (depending on which one you're examining), speculate as to why it's absent and what the implications of that absence are.

4. In which version of *The Big Sleep* does Marlowe seem most clearly to embody the hard-boiled code Chandler sets out in "The Simple Art of Murder," and why? Does Marlowe's character remain consistent from version to version? You should provide examples from **at least** two versions of *TBS*--the novel, the 1946 film, and/or your own version--and should discuss these examples with clear reference to "Simple Art of Murder." If you find that Chandler's hard-boiled code begins to slip away, how would you define or characterize what takes its place?

4-6 pages. Two copies due in class on Tuesday, October 27.

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Focus, Force, Unity, and Linkage: Why and How to State a Thesis

As I said in class on Tuesday, as a group you've developed something of a knack for using and explaining specific details in order to craft individual paragraphs and argue individual points. In fact, most responses to essay assignment #4 involved some sort of detailed exploration of a number of points. Now, as you organize and write essay #5, one of your tasks is to write your way to a solid, unifying **argument**--an argument which should make an early and clear appearance in your paper through a carefully worded thesis statement.

A strong thesis statement may require more than one sentence. It should express the genuine problem or claim with which your paper will deal--and that problem or claim should *require* your explanation or analysis. Your thesis statement may also suggest your paper's organizing principle, or the way in which you've structured your argument, through alluding to the sub-arguments you'll undertake in the essay.

A strong thesis will help to unify and organize your essay because you can arrange your ideas in relation to a main argument. Condensing your main idea into a recognizable thesis will help you (and, later, your reader) keep the essay's main idea focused and clear throughout the paper. One of your classmates has explained, quite cogently, the way "organization can be made stronger by strengthening and clarifying the thesis":

> **The thesis should . . . focus in on a particular argument -- and then [be] used as the focus behind each paragraph. . . . [T]here needs to be a driving and unifying force behind [an essay's] ideas.**

What this student has realized is that even if your individual paragraphs make excellent points, without a strong thesis "linking the paragraphs together into one whole argument," those excellent points will most likely feel disconnected and thereby less powerful.

Where does the strong thesis come from? And when does it arrive?

As I've indicated on most people's topic proposals, you may not actually know what your essay's final thesis will be until *after* you start to write. Often, writers discover their central, unifying arguments in the process of organizing evidence and writing a first draft. This discovery-through-writing hearkens back to the provisional theory assignments with which we began this semester. Obviously, you need some sort of focus to get started writing. But that focus may shift and become nuanced or complicated as you proceed to write. This shifting is only natural: when you start to write about a novel or movie, you put yourself into a much more interactive relationship with your evidence. You may discover connections, parallels, or contradictions that previously escaped you. You may clarify or specify aspects of your argument which were previously a bit unclear or confusing to you. Sometimes you'll discover that whole sections of your readings or analyses no longer sound plausible, once you start writing them out. Try to keep yourself flexible. Knowing that the act of writing itself will help to tighten, specify, and clarify your argument may also help you to avoid writers' block or paralysis at the thought of writing before you have a full grasp on what you're arguing. Flexibility will become more and more important as you undertake long writing projects.

But if the thesis changes as you write, what do you do when your concluding thesis is suddenly not the thesis with which you began the paper?
You do the only thing you *can* do: you **revise**. Chances are, you'll have switched focus subtly, or not so subtly, somewhere in the middle of the paper. Once you have your thesis in hand, head back to the beginning of the paper and work that thesis into the essay so that your reader will know what your paper's unifying argument is. Then, be sure that each of your paragraphs connects or refers to this thesis.

How do you know when you have a strong thesis?
A thesis should state your paper's general subject and should also describe the particular, special aspect of that general subject that you will develop as the essay progresses. Furthermore, the thesis may suggest *how* you'll proceed with your discussion and analysis.

See if your thesis passes the following tests, which should guard against obvious or trivial pseudo-arguments.

THESIS TESTS:

1. Ask yourself, "Is this thesis statement over-simplified? Is it simply descriptive, or does it argue something?"
2. Read over your thesis and ask yourself, honestly but as kindly as possible, "Is this statement boring? Is it obvious? Does my audience already know and accept this idea from common sense and past reading?"
3. Pretend you're the reader, and ask (again, kindly but honestly), "Having read this statement, do I proceed to read the rest of the essay eagerly, or do I set it aside?"
4. Think up the anti-thesis--a statement which argues the exact opposite of your thesis. Is your anti-thesis an opponent worth arguing against? Or is your essay arguing against a point that no one would believe anyhow? Many writers will try to build this "anti-thesis" into their own thesis statement (or at least to allude to it), sometimes beginning with an "although" or "despite" clause:

   Sample thesis: **Despite his seemingly impenetrable tough-guy façade and his earlier attempts to ignore his anxieties about death, Philip Marlowe's reaction to Harry Jones' murder reveals a particular psychological tension that has been building throughout *The Big Sleep* and continues to build until his final contemplation of "the big sleep."**

   In its first clause, this particular thesis statement hints at counter-arguments that could be leveled against an interpretation of Marlowe as troubled by death--namely, the argument that his tough-guy identity is impenetrable, that he ignores death early in the book, and (by implication) that his reaction to Harry Jones' murder is just an anomaly. The statement seems to indicate that this essay will discuss
   - Marlowe's reaction to Jones' murder
   - the roots of Marlowe's reaction, earlier in the book
   - Marlowe's "particular psychological tension" about mortality
   - the final "big sleep" passage on pp. 230-231.

   So too can we see that the thesis statement offers a conceptualization of *The Big Sleep* as a whole (leading up to and then continuing on from Jones' murder).

Developing a thesis that will guide your arguments and provide your paper with a "driving and unifying force" will require time and effort. But your essay will become more obviously provocative, purposive, and generally worth reading as a result.